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Chick Strand

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“Don’t just Go dance

Phelan Winner Chick Strand Is

by Irina Leimbacher

Who is Chick Strand, winner of the 1998 Phelan Art Award in Filmmaking? The name is a familiar one in Bay Area experimental film circles, associated as it is with the passionate and heady days of the early '60s, when the doors of perception and representation were flung wide open. A swirl of images comes to mind. There is Strand in costume, collecting one-dollar donations (or IOUs) in a sewing basket at the door of a Canyon screening she has organized; today the screening's in an anarchist restaurant, tomorrow in someone's backyard. There she is disappearing, heading south to L.A., going to film school. Periodically she is seen traveling with her 16mm camera to Venezuela and many times to Mexico. She becomes a teacher. Every three to four years her films make their way back up north and are screened at places like the Cinematheque and the Pacific Film Archive. The last time she shows up with them is at a retrospective in 1994.

My own sense of Chick Strand is of an idiosyncratic, independent, headstrong woman—someone who doesn't give a damn what other people think, who is not a member of any movement, who trusts her intuition and who gives a prominent place to emotion, whether joyful elation or deeply felt suffering, in her creative work. Now in her sixties, she still has long, wild black-and-grey hair and is vibrant and full of humor, despite the painful arthritis that often prevents her from climbing the stairs to her editing room.

**“I’m an atheist anarchist humanist.
Whatever the fuck that means.”**

The Phelan Art Award in Filmmaking has been given biennially since 1982 as part of the Phelan Trust



Soft Fiction

of the San Francisco Foundation. The Trust was established to encourage the work of California-born literary and visual artists. Chick Strand merits the award. She is not only California-born and bred (in Berkeley, to be specific), but with the exception of her fruitful filmic forays into Mexico and South America, she has spent her whole life in California. In addition to her sizable body of work (about 20 films), she arguably has done as much for experimental film in California as anyone. With Bruce Baillie, Strand created Canyon Cinema, then a nomadic venue for experimental film exhibition and advocacy, featuring tri-weekly screenings, a newsletter and workshops in film production. Strand and Baillie's Canyon Cinema has since metamorphosed into two Bay Area institutions, the independent film distributor of the same name and the San Francisco Cinematheque. Later, after becoming a filmmaker, Strand also became a film teacher, inspiring countless students during her 20-odd years teaching at Occidental College in Los Angeles, where she was the director of the film program until her retirement in 1996. Today Strand is still working, editing several films—with working titles like *Cockfight* and *Mujer con Flores*—in her home.

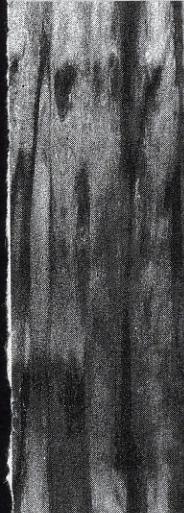
By the Lake

“ Film is simply another language for me. Here are some more of my ‘languages’: anthropology, matehood, motherhood, teacher/mentor, painter, gardener, collage maker, cabinet maker, reader, motorist, novice house repair person, seamstress, dog trainer, traveler, music buff and believer. I believe in science, in quantum mechanics, J.S. Bach and all of his 25 children, the cave paintings, that Lucy is the mother of us all, Charles Darwin, Billie, Ella and Hildegard. I believe that death is final and that people who think otherwise are crazy, and I believe that not everything is possible... ”



stand there. with it."

Honored for a Lifetime of Filmmaking



Of course, Strand's most unique contribution to the California artistic landscape is her work. It ranges from found-footage collage films to surreal and sensual dream visions, from intimate, poetic documentaries to playfully postmodern reflections on the nature of identity, knowledge and narrative. It cannot be lumped into one formal category or linked by a single thematic focus. And yet there is something in Strand's films that is quintessentially hers.

"Don't just stand there. Go dance with it," is what Strand tells her students when they are learning to use a Bolex. In her own films, she dances—with the camera, with the people she films, but also, through her aural and visual montages, with the suffering inherent in life and with the joy one feels nonetheless. Her dance is personal, intuitive, spontaneous. The camera often seems to be an extension of her body, of her gestures toward the world. One *feels* Strand in many of her films, one *becomes* her—her eyes, her desire, her perplexity, her deep love of life. It is this dance that I find most inspiring in her work: the dance of the camera, which roves over and caresses surfaces, textures, bodies in motion—close-ups of moving breasts, hands at work and feet are Strand staples—and the slippery dance of meanings created by her montage of found and original elements, by the collision of contrasting visions of the same social world.

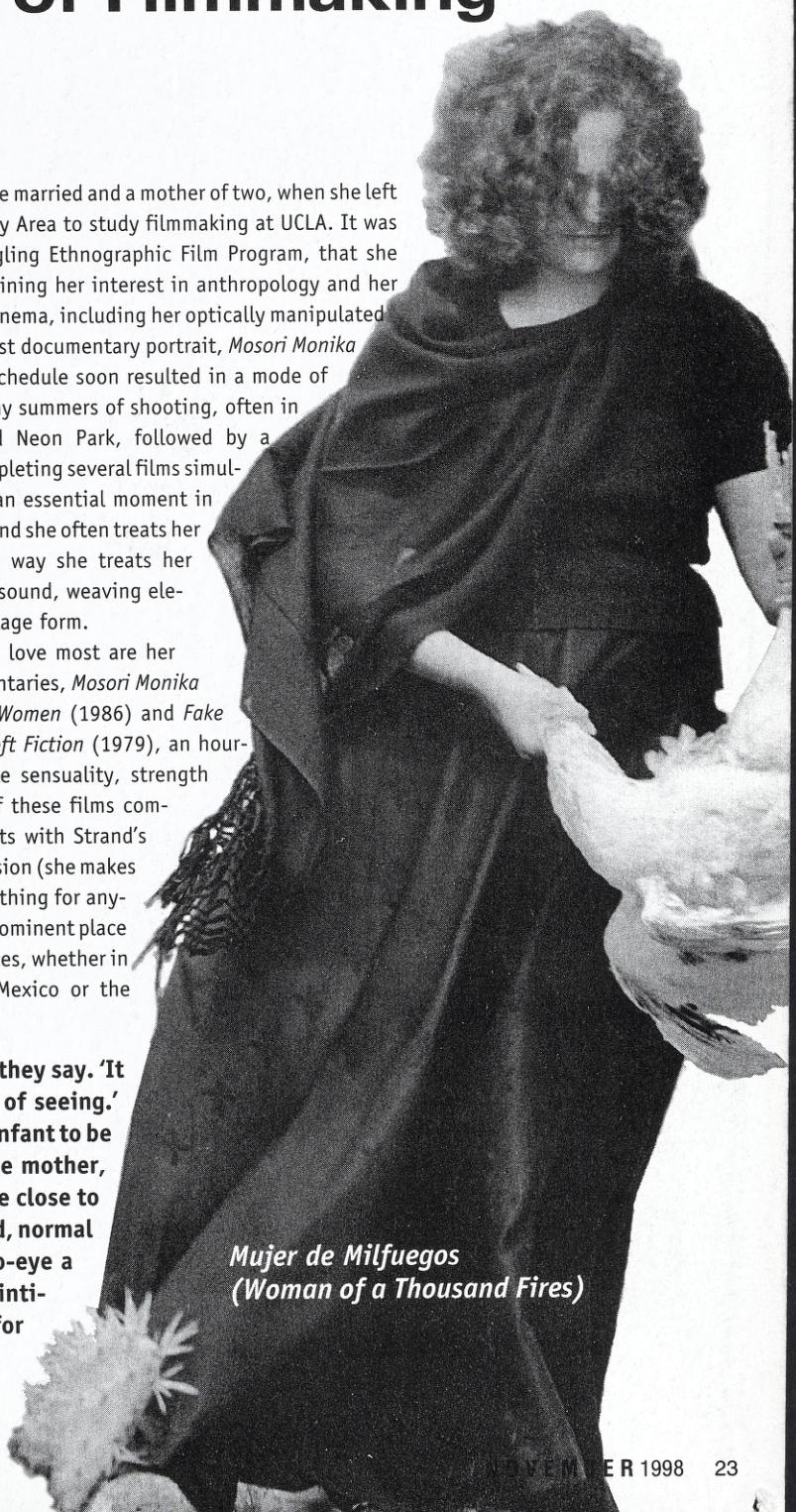
"You wouldn't want to make a film knowing what it was about.... If you knew beforehand there would be no adventure to it."

Strand was 34, twice married and a mother of two, when she left Canyon Cinema and the Bay Area to study filmmaking at UCLA. It was there, as part of the fledgling Ethnographic Film Program, that she made her early films combining her interest in anthropology and her passion for experimental cinema, including her optically manipulated *Anselmo* (1967) and her first documentary portrait, *Mosori Monika* (1970). A busy teaching schedule soon resulted in a mode of working that involved many summers of shooting, often in Mexico with her husband Neon Park, followed by a summer of editing and completing several films simultaneously. The editing is an essential moment in Strand's creative process, and she often treats her own footage in the same way she treats her appropriated footage and sound, weaving elements together into a collage form.

Among the films I love most are her three short lyrical documentaries, *Mosori Monika* (1970), *Anselmo and the Women* (1986) and *Fake Fruit* (1986); as well as *Soft Fiction* (1979), an hour-long film exploring female sensuality, strength and transformation. All of these films combine documentary elements with Strand's very personal and quirky vision (she makes no claims to represent anything for anyone), and they each give prominent place to women's lived experiences, whether in rural Venezuela, central Mexico or the United States.

"No closeups please,' they say. 'It is not the normal way of seeing.' But it is normal for an infant to be close to the face of the mother, normal for a lover to be close to the body of the beloved, normal to face a friend eye-to-eye a foot away and talk intimately, and normal for

(continued next page)



Mujer de Milfuegos
(*Woman of a Thousand Fires*)



Coming Up for Air

that person to see only the face of the friend and not his or her own face. 'No fragments of movement,' they say. But it is normal for a child sitting beside wome, n grinding corn to see only their hand movements, normal to catch fragments of the costume of the person dancing next to you out of the corner of your eye, normal to see only the flank of a cow when you are milking her. Maybe it is normal for the anthropologist to be so far removed, but not for the people living in the culture."—Chick Strand, "Notes on Ethnographic Film by a Film Artist," *Wide Angle*, 1978

In *Mosori Monika, Anselmo and the Women* and *Fake Fruit*, Strand uses a hand-held, non-sync camera placed very close to her subjects, the lens set on extreme telephoto with little depth of field. In *Mosori Monika*, she focuses on a Warao woman and a Spanish nun in the Orinoco region of Venezuela, where the first Franciscan missionaries arrived in 1945. In *Anselmo and the Women*, her subjects are Anselmo (already the subject of two earlier films by Strand), Adela, his wife and mother of his ten children, and his lover, Cruz. And in *Fake Fruit* she looks at the Mexican women employees and their American boss in a small papier-maché fruit factory. In each of these films, we as spectators are stripped of our customary and anonymous distance and are thrown into Strand's worlds with her. It is as if we not only see but sentiently partake in the daily rituals of scrubbing laundry, preparing food, raising children, taking showers, working. Over her images Strand interweaves her subjects' voices (whether their own or in translation) as they speak about their lives, their work, their longings and desires. What is most remarkable about these films is that they are not just intimate portraits of individuals; rather they explore the spaces between

people, spaces where irreconcilable differences and incongruous perspectives play themselves out, where tensions cannot be made to simply disappear, and where no controlling voice tells us what to think.

Because it includes four lengthy sync-sound monologues shot with a camera on a tripod, *Soft Fiction* could be seen as atypical of Strand's work. Yet in its structure and tone, in its attention to

Strand's films explore the spaces between people, where tensions cannot be made to simply disappear, and where no controlling voice tells us what to think.

sensual delight, to the experience of struggle and transformation, it could only be hers. The film opens with a voice from a relaxation tape instructing us to close our eyes and breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, heard over blurred images shot through a moving train and later over a series of close-ups of a woman traveler who, reappearing at various junctures of the film, acts as a surrogate both for Strand and for the female spectator (us) she invokes.

The five testimonials which form the body of the work are all spoken by women directly addressing Strand and her camera. One woman tells of her sexual arousal from a spiral staircase bannister; another reads a letter from a woman photographer who gave blowjobs to cowboys at a rodeo; a third tells her story of incest in voiceover while she is filmed naked, cooking and eating breakfast; a fourth speaks of her experience with addiction, to men and to heroin; and the last begins to tell us a story of escaping from the Nazis as a child in occupied Poland. Between these episodes we see the traveler—desperate at not being able to enter a house, spilling her carefully packed belongings, being washed over by streams of water; we see a woman dancing and another woman singing

Schubert; and we have one of the most memorable of Strand's cuts—to a three-legged dog in an arm chair, whose attempt at standing is accompanied by rousing applause.

"I'm not making a social statement. You know I have no message for you. None. Unless you want to make it up...but it's not my message to you, it's the message you get out of it."

For me, Strand's work is full of a deep yet sorrowful joy. It is always sensual, often wryly humorous and never self-important. Her vision, her world, is one of relationship, whether between herself and her subjects, her subjects' divergent perspectives, or her own many selves. Her camera constantly dances, constantly gestures towards an elusive space of becoming, and there is no totalizing or controlling voice in her films. Instead we are faced with the multiplicity and complexity of life and the ongoing struggle with meaning. Many of her films are journeys, open texts marked by numerous ruptures and a sense of the impossibility of resolution, in which it becomes our responsibility and our pleasure to create our own circuitous paths. Journeying between a quest for seemingly unmediated sensuous images and a critical, reflective stance which challenges and explores the representational process, her work is a celebration of human dignity, vulnerability and strength, as well as of the transient and shifting place that is life.

Strand's films explore the spaces between people, where tensions cannot be made to simply disappear, and where no controlling voice tells us what to think.

Today Chick Strand's work continues to attract new attention despite the fact that her last batch of six films dates from 1986 (mainly due to the long illness of her late husband and her own health problems). In 1994 she was the subject of a full retrospective at the Pacific Film Archive; in 1996 she was the recipient of a Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists presented by the American Film Institute; in 1998 she was the subject of lengthy interviews in both *Wide Angle* and *Discourse*. Now she has received the Phelan Art Award in Filmmaking. On November 14 and 15 Strand will be in San Francisco to accept this award from the San Francisco Foundation and to attend two evenings of her films co-presented by Film Arts Foundation, Canyon Cinema and the Cinematheque at the San Francisco Art Institute. Come see her dance! □

Except where otherwise attributed, quotes are taken from the author's interviews with Chick Strand.

Strand's films screen at 7 pm on Saturday, November 14, and 7:30 pm on Sunday, November 15, at the S.F. Art Institute, 800 Chestnut St., S.F.

Irina Leimbacher is artistic co-director of S.F. Cinematheque and teaches optical printing at FAF.